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Hindu Psyche and the Persistence of Caste:

Reading Ajay Navaria's 'New Custom'

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Abstract:

The system of caste in India which is deeply embedded in the Hindu culture of the country does not sanction the inclusion of the 'Shudras' within the closed-door system. Ajay Navaria's 'New Custom' illustrates the discriminatory practices which survive the legal prohibition of untouchability. What is disconcerting in the story is that the change of a so-called lower caste man's status—endowed with education and financial affluence—does not put an end to his humiliation. Although the protagonist is a university professor who has a commendable sense of physical and mental sanity he becomes a victim of the casteist prejudices of a rustic, uneducated and vulgar tea-shopkeeper simply because he is a 'harijan'. The present paper seeks to diagnose

the psyche of Hindu culture to discern the spectrum of caste which is but a psychological construct. In an intricate analysis of 'New Custom' the present article highlights the shallowness and inhumanity of the caste system and its psychologically violent form which prevails today.

Key words: Dalit, 'harijan', caste system, psychology, custom, humiliation

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B. R. Ambedkar's notion of caste as a category which serves the interest of the facilitated Brahmin class in an enclosed policy of endogamy has far-reaching social significance. The origin of caste at the later Vedic period split the community into four castes which followed the Varna system. While the Varna system was not a closed system at the beginning, observes Ambedkar, it took a hierarchical form with the Brahmin's practice of endogamy. Endogamy prohibited the intermingling of classes by following a closed-door policy which prohibited the shift from one class to another. Thus, class (an open system) acquired the form of caste which became a closed system. The class system which was based on occupation took the form of caste in which one section of society was considered to be lower, polluted and unworthy of social contact. The 'lower' caste Shudra community henceforth had been subjected to the brunt of oppression, exploitation and humiliation. The caste system is thus a largely psychological construct which serves the interest of the Brahmins. The fallen or untouchable status of the Shudras is not based on any scientific premise but on propaganda. Caste is a social performance which is repeated in order to give the system solidity. It is infused within the psyche of individuals since their childhood so that they maintain the status of themselves and behave accordingly with others. The

system thus prevails. Baburao Bagul observes that the mainstream literature of India is essentially 'Hindu' in character which has never accommodated the Shudras. In spite of the fact that the Constitution of India prohibited untouchability the practice is still prevalent. According to Bagul, 'democracy and the *varna* system co-exist in India today; so do *Bheemsmriti* (the ideology of Dr Ambedkar) and *Manusmriti*. India lives two lives simultaneously, one in the twentieth century, another in the middle ages; it is riven into two forms of life, two social orders' (286).

In his short story 'New Custom', Ajay Navaria represents this twin façade of the Hindu society. In the story he builds on the psychological construct of caste with which the rural scenario is still confined. The narrator who is also the protagonist arrives to a North Indian village, Rajgarh, by bus. From the beginning of the story, the protagonist is portrayed as a clean and tidy person who despises anything dirty and odorous. This hygienic person is not only physically clean but also mentally pure. He is well-dressed and his appearance creates an air of superiority. He teaches in a university and thus he is free from caste-related prejudices which paralyze the entire society. Navaria writes: 'Having taught for ten years at a famous university in the metropolis, he had acquired a special kind of pride and refinement' (131). He has disagreement with his father who thinks that change of one's social status or money can not change everything. But the protagonist is confidant in his education and financial affluence. He says very firmly that 'money changes everything,' and his father has to quiet down because the 'position of a young, salaried son is like a young lion's' (133). The protagonist can not expect the kind of humiliation that lies in wait for him.

The caste system in India is based on some psychological prejudices which is implied in the way the tea-shopkeeper at first thinks the protagonist to be an upper-caste man because of his decent manners and neat dress-up. He addresses him as 'darbar'—a title 'reserved for the thakur landlords of the region' (132). The protagonist enjoys the address 'darbar' which however proves to be his mistake. He forgets for a moment that he is a 'harijan' and the caste-prejudiced social circumstances in the village will not allow him to join the group of the upper-caste people. He was born in a so-called lower-caste family, and the caste system demands that he must bear with the humiliation for his ancestry. The imitation of the manners of the upper-caste people, which is decidedly another form of Hinduization, must face the reality, because the Shudras are not permitted to imitate the Brahmins or the Kshatriyas. And when such a person faces the reality, his illusion is broken as he is subjected to disgrace and exploitation by the upper caste members. Arjun Dangle writes: 'Hindu religious texts forbade them (the dalits) to wear good clothes or ornaments or even footwear, and prescribed severe and humiliating punishment for violating these orders' (235). When the protagonist enquires about the house of the person he would visit, the shopkeeper comes to know about his caste. His relative Dharm Singh is a 'harijan' who is a person of the lower caste and hence the shopkeeper infers that the protagonist too is a person belonging to the lower caste. It is because only a harijan can be the relative of another harijan. The closed system of caste is maintained by endogamy and thus harijans are confined within the sphere of harijans.

The protagonist is a man of higher education. He does not suffer from mental illness that shrouds the mind of the villagers. He is conscious of hygiene as he urges his wife Romila to clean her hands every time before preparing dough of roti. While he tells Romila, 'You don't care for hygiene,' his wife would shout at him saying 'And you are obsessed with cleanliness'

(131). When he gets down from the bus, he feels nausea due to the foul smell that a naked, soil-bodied beggar was emitting. He is repulsive of the uncleanliness of the tea-shop. The utensils are very dirty. But he is compelled to visit the shop because he is unable to find any clean tea-shop nearby, and also because he has to enquire about the location of his relative's house in the adjacent village. The owner of the shop is also very unclean: 'The shopkeeper has a dusky, oily face that sported a vermilion tilak. His rotten teeth were stained black by paan masala' (132).

Ironically, when the protagonist's identity is exposed, the shopkeeper's voice abnormally changes from respect to disdain. He rudely tells the protagonist to wash the glass. The protagonist was absolutely not prepared for such an offensive behaviour; he feels 'as though a bucket of water (has) been dumped on him' (136). The inhuman and offensive behaviour curbs his dignity. He protests it even though his protest does not make any change in the mindset of the shopkeeper:

> The shopkeeper's next question was meant to clinch the issue. "Should I serve you the tea now in a harijan glass?"
>
> "And if I hadn't told you…?" Under the weight of the insult, the words emerged with difficulty.
>
> "If you hadn't said anything, the sin would have been on you. You don't drink from a cup once you've spotted a fly in it," the shopkeeper shouted, raising his hands. (136)

The shopkeeper even gets some of his friends by his side to argue the harijan's guilt in suppressing his caste. One of them pursues him: 'Why are you being stubborn, brother? Just wash it, this is the custom here' (136). This clearly reveals the psychological construction of

caste which is not based on scientific or empirical premises of inferiority and unworthiness but on narrow-minded dogma. The protagonist would not have suffered from humiliation if he had suppressed his caste. It is difficult to conceptualize an educated, decent and well-dressed person to be 'harijan', especially when perceived from the stereotypical notions of the Shudra as ill-bred, untidy and dressed in rags. The shopkeeper himself says that 'it's not as of it's written on someone's forehead who is what' (136). But when he comes to know the destination of the protagonist, which is a harijan's house, he comprehends the latter's caste. As the protagonist stubbornly refuses to wash the glass, the shopkeeper shouts his 'war cry' in a tone of threat: 'He's going to get thrashed. The bastard's exposed' (136). His words reflect the age-old ideological belief of the upper-caste Hindus that 'a rise in status does not put an end to custom' (136). The caste paradigm is inherent, that is, caste is imposed on a person right from his or her birth. And hence, the change of status even with higher education and fair income does not sanction a lower-caste person with the privileges of the higher castes. In Navaria's story, it is the custom of the village that any harijan taking tea should wash the glass before leaving the tea-shop. The shopkeeper, who is uneducated and hence can not look beyond the stereotypes, adamantly follows the custom. This is also 'new' custom—although the Government has legally banned the system of untouchability, the practice is still prevalent in many parts of the country, especially in rural sides which are deprived of the light of education.

The psychological construction of caste is again brought out in this story with a sharp distinction drawn between the protagonist and the shopkeeper. While the protagonist is educated and refined in his taste the latter is vulgar and crude. Unlike the shopkeeper, the protagonist does not see women as sex-objects. At the beginning of the story Navaria gives a mental picture of the protagonist which is stuffed with various commodities in winter:

> A tonic advertisement features honeymooners raving about a saffron-containing product and the 'heat' it generates. This is a man's world, where women are treated like objects and men as deluded into believing themselves to be the customers. (130)

He does not feel easy with the gross joke of the shopkeeper whose reaction to a snacks advertisement by an elderly actress crosses the limit of decency. The latter's attitude to women is profoundly gender-biased. Against the charge of his wife who complains that he does not have any idea of what is going on in and around the village, he justifies himself with these words: 'I slave away the whole day for two pieces of roti…and what do women do? They live off our earnings, they idly eat and sleep' (134). He is expressly an illiterate person whose mind is shrouded with some set principles and he can hardly look beyond. In fact, the story insinuates whose contact is to be avoided. The shopkeeper may not belong to a so-called lower caste, but his behaviour, attitude and even looks argue against his own argument of caste-policies. He renders himself a lewd person while at the same time unwittingly elevates the status of the protagonist to the reader's eye.

The canonical writers, observe Satyanarayan and Tharu in the introduction to the anthology *The Exercise of Freedom,* adhered to the Gandhian nationalism who did not discuss such uneasy topics as caste, class and gender because they believed 'these 'internal' problems […] would divide Indians' (8). To consider all sections of Indians as 'a unified force to challenge British rule obscured many questions of inequality amongst Indians, most importantly, the questions of freedom from slavery and untouchability' (9). It was Dr Ambedkar who first radically challenged the politics of Gandhi and the National Congress by raising the issue of caste. The jeer of the shopkeeper at the very end of 'New Custom' after he is successful in

defeating the protagonist has been compared with the smile of Gandhiji on a hundred rupee note. It is often debated by dalit scholars that Gandhiji was not genuine in his 'sympathy' with the untouchables. He argued in favour of the abolition of untouchability but he seldom spoke of the dismissal of the caste system. Ambedkar felt that 'treating as equal those who are not equal, only increased inequality' (Satyanarayan and Tharu 9). For Ambedkar, 'the Congress was a handmaiden of the capitalists and the upper castes' (Dangle 258). Ambedkar gave equal importance to the abolition of the caste system and India's independence, because the Independence would be meaningless unless the free nation provided equality and justice to its lower stratum of people who had been chained with the manacles of caste.

B Krishnappa finds out the terrible injustices lying in the 'glorious' history of India as he records the reality of dalit communities since ancient times:

> They were required to live outside the village limits. It deemed them unworthy of touch or sight it ascribed to them the task of scavenging and of consuming the dead cattle. The self-anointed Brahmin, at the top of the caste system, exploited people in the name of the gods, the Vedas and the puranas. He proclaimed that only he had the right to learning. (108)

The story of Ajay Navaria, however, does not conceive the dalit protagonist similar to the awful description provided by Krishnappa. Such treatments of the dalits at present are quite rare, but their ghettoization is not infrequent. It is mostly the rural areas of the country, away from the glow of education, which maintains the caste system with medieval barbarity. The protagonist of 'New Custom' is not deprived of higher education, and he has acquired finery of etiquette and sophisticated sense of dressing along with financial success. But his humiliation by a rustic and vulgar tea-shopkeeper is disconcerting. It raises the question whether a man's education,

manners and sanitation matter nothing if he belongs to a dalit community. The shopkeeper and his abusive friends take into consideration nothing except the protagonist's caste. To their eyes he is only a 'harijan'. Satyanarayan and Tharu call this 'a new kind of violence—the everyday, continuous, psychological violence of social and cultural power' (15). The social custom of humiliating and denigrating the dalits continues, even if the form has changed.

However, the protagonist faces most offensive treatment not so much from the nature of humiliation as from its uncommon manifestation to him. He has distanced himself from the lower-class dalits of his community blinded by his sense of superiority. He enjoys the address 'darbar' when the shopkeeper addresses him so. He is forgetful of the wide spectrum of caste in India. Dangle criticizes the snobbery of those dalits who consider themselves superior to other members of their community by virtue of their education or financial wellbeing:

> […] some educated people from amongst the Dalits […] wanted to forget their past, could not face the harsh social realities surrounding them and were filled with an inferiority complex. They took all the benefits of concession resulting from Dr Ambedkar's movement, but the movement made no impact on them. They believed that with their individual prosperity society also had prospered. (250)

The protagonist of Navaria's story is one such 'elite dalit' who is hurled down to dust to remind him of the shallowness of his vanity. This is not a comforting issue though. The elevation of status is every person's right, and when someone's higher education, prestigious job and sense of dignity are thwarted by some irreverent beliefs the democratic structure of India proves to be shaky.

The story is set in a foggy morning: 'It was well past nine in the morning, but because of the heavy fog, it seemed that night was gathering. The sun's rays could not penetrate the dense fog' (130). This weather is symbolic which implies the fog of caste-ridden psyche of the Hindu culture in India. And because of this darkening fog any better future can not be envisaged. But the story shows a glimmer of subversion of stereotypical notions of caste that taint the upper-caste Hindu psychology. The protagonist does not obey the shopkeeper's insistence to wash the glass but instead pays the price of the glass and breaks it stridently: 'Picking up the glass, he smashed it against the chabutara, the platform under the trees on which village folk sat for tea and chit-chat' (137). This is a small act of protest, which is, however, the core of dalit literature, as Dangle points out, 'Dalit literature is marked by revolt and negativism' (xi). The breaking of the glass saves the protagonist from the humiliation of washing the glass. He retains his self-dignity. But the smile which blooms on the shopkeeper's face is a proof that his catharsis is negated by his obstinate character.

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